

Lesbian Motherhood and Discourses of Respectability

In June 2004, I attended a backyard barbeque for a birthday celebration, and among the guests were two Black lesbians who had adopted a child. Soon after, another Black lesbian couple arrived with their newly adopted daughter, who was about nine months old. Everyone oohed and ahhed at the babies. I listened as the mothers complained good-naturedly about sleepless nights and the speed at which young children can crawl. The group of women at the gathering celebrated these children, in part because they represented proof of the two couple's link (and by extension, other lesbian mothers' link) to the broader, societal community of mothers. The couples' experience served as proof to the other women that they too could "have it all": they could express a public lesbian identity and be mothers.

The version of motherhood in evidence at this barbeque is one to which scholars have devoted quite a bit of attention over the past few decades—albeit with a focus on White women. A body of research emerged over the past fifteen years that has defined as "lesbian motherhood" the experiences of women who begin parenting after taking on a gay identity. This body of work frames the issue as "lesbians choosing motherhood," and it has initiated a sustained dialogue around the extent to which parenting lesbians are transforming the institution of motherhood or assimilating into heterosexual understandings and assumptions that surround motherhood. The empirical research that has dominated this area of study tends to exclude from study participation

those women who became mothers prior to enacting a gay sexuality, and in so doing has written into the discourse a particular definition of lesbian family.¹

Many researchers have framed past studies of lesbian motherhood to make their results comparable to those of other empirical research on family structure and family process in heterosexual two-parent families. Such an analogous study design makes it easier to address central assumptions in the literature regarding the division of household labor and the distribution of child care and childrearing tasks.² Research on lesbian-headed families also tends to be framed around long-held assumptions about lesbian identity, particularly the idea that lesbians as a group are more egalitarian in their distribution of paid work, housework, and childcare, and that they organize their households and interact with each other in ways that support this principle. Unfortunately, restricting samples so that they only include women who take on a lesbian identity before becoming parents biases research studies, and the literature more generally, toward the experiences of White middle- and upper-income lesbians, who are better able to afford costly insemination procedures and who are more likely to support the ideological principles of egalitarian feminism.³ Mezey (2008), who studied lesbian women's views of motherhood, noted in a discussion of her research methodology that she had considerable difficulty recruiting working-class and Black women for her study, yet this is not surprising when one evaluates the criteria she used to define who is a lesbian mother. Her criteria excluded not only women who gave birth in the context of prior heterosexual relationships but also lesbians who had become parental figures through live-in relationships with female partners and their biological children.

Maintaining such a narrow definition of who is a lesbian parent does a disservice to our understanding of the complexities of lesbian motherhood because it implicitly overrepresents the less common route to a lesbian sexuality and identity status. That is, the majority of today's mothers who identify as gay became parents by bearing a child in the context of a marital or cohabiting union. For example, a 2002 national survey of lesbians found that just 5.6 percent of White mothers and 2.8 percent of Black mothers had their children using alternative insemination techniques, while an additional 6.5 percent of White mothers and 12.3 percent of Black mothers had adopted. The vast majority of White mothers (84.4 percent) and Black mothers (84.9 percent) became parents through sex with a husband or male partner (Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum 2002). These figures suggest not only that our understanding

of who counts as a lesbian mother must be expanded but also that the experience of motherhood may be transformed or influenced by the timing of when one begins to identify as lesbian. The question of how women understand and experience motherhood in the context of changing social circumstances, such as changing sexual orientation, deserves attention in its own right.

Expanding our definition of lesbian motherhood will particularly offer insight into a population that has received little attention from scholars: lesbian stepparents. We know about some of the issues and conflicts that arise when a grandmother or other adult relative shares a household and parenting responsibilities with her adult daughter and her children, and we are learning more about lesbian co-parents, who are the nonbiological but legal parents to their partners' children via alternative insemination.⁴ We know very little, however, about women who act as parental figures in the context of intimate relationships with women who are already mothers through birth or adoption.

The experiences of a variety of Black lesbian mothers are presented in this chapter, including those who had their children while in heterosexual relationships, those who adopted, who experienced childbirth as a lesbian through alternative insemination, and lesbian stepparents. In my survey sample of one hundred respondents, fifty-five women are mothers through birth or adoption, and thirteen are nonbiological mothers who are parenting a partner's child in a stepfamily household. Of the sixty-eight women engaged in some form of parenting, 46 percent, or thirty-one women, entered into motherhood in a heterosexual relationship prior to coming out as gay, and all of them had their children through a biological birth. Forty-five percent of these thirty-one women became mothers in the context of a heterosexual marriage, and the rest had children in a heterosexual dating relationship. On average, these women first became mothers at age twenty-one and took on a lesbian identity at age twenty-eight.⁵ In terms of education, 26 percent, or eight of the thirty-one respondents who had children in a heterosexual marriage, completed school with a four-year college degree, and 19 percent (six women) have an advanced degree beyond the bachelor's. With regard to gender presentation, 61 percent are femme, 26 percent are gender-blenders, and 13 percent are transgressive. In this chapter I consider these women's experiences with coming to accept a lesbian identity and with motherhood, paying particular attention to how the interaction of these two identities are shaped by Black women's histories and current experiences with race, class, and sexuality.

After they come out as gay, many women who become mothers in the context of prior heterosexual unions continue to make a concentrated effort to satisfy the societal definition of a “good mother” that is implicitly linked to heterosexuality. Through family members, media messages, and religious messages, society tells women that good mothers are responsible not only for nurturing their children and protecting them from harm, but also for representing a particular standard of heterosexuality. This expectation produces a conflict for mothers who want to identify as lesbians. This conflict is similar to the one that single heterosexual mothers face, though it is compounded by lesbian mothers’ openly gay sexuality. The types of issues that mothers face for being lesbians are compounded when they not only have a sexual orientation that is considered deviant, but must also contend with negative stereotypes around race. This is the case for Black lesbian mothers. In choosing to live an openly gay life, they battle negative images that surround their multiple marginalized statuses, and must balance societal expectations of good motherhood and respectable womanhood, while also expressing sexual freedom and autonomy.

The role of mother has been emphasized as women’s true purpose and main focus in life (Collins 2000; Thorne 1992). In African American communities, the status of mother is especially revered, and for much of U.S. history motherhood was the primary means by which Black women could achieve any status at all. Historically, Black women’s sexuality has been subject to particular visibility, scrutiny, and judgment. Hammonds argues that the sexuality of Black women has primarily been evaluated in opposition to the experiences of White women, and in dominant discourses it has been simultaneously rendered “invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized” (1997, 170).

Certain discourses⁶ around Black women’s respectability emerged as a political response to negative images of Black women’s sexuality that were propagated after Reconstruction as a basis for denying full citizenship (Giddings 1984). African American communities relied on discourses of respectability and the politics of silence to counteract images of Black mothers as sexually deviant and less capable of nurturing children and rearing them properly.⁷ The ideologies behind these discourses remain a driving force in today’s Black environments, both among the Black middle class and among Black working-class mothers. They encourage individuals to overemphasize positive images of themselves in order to reflect affirmingly on Blacks as a collective group. Black women who have been socialized in predominantly Black con-

texts bring these ideologies and practices with them as they enter into a gay sexuality, and they use them to organize their lives.

Openly gay Black women must negotiate the process of mothering through discourses of Black respectability, while also affirming their own sexual autonomy. Their sexual orientation forces a sexual self into visibility in the context of motherhood, which frightens some and goes against a politics of silence in this arena.⁸ This chapter asks a number of questions about how they accomplish this: What are the family, neighborhood, and social contexts in which Black lesbians make decisions about whether and how to have children, and how does a gay sexuality matter for the way women conceive of motherhood? How does the timing of motherhood and taking on a gay sexuality shape how lesbians come to understand the meanings of these statuses and what they imply for their own sense of self? How do discourses of respectability shape the definitions and understandings of motherhood for Black lesbians, and how are these discourses shaped by the affirmation of sexual agency implied in living a lesbian life? And how are these issues understood and enacted for single versus partnered lesbians, middle-class versus working-class mothers, and lesbians with feminine versus nonfeminine gender presentations? I address these questions by examining in detail how women in five different families entered lesbian motherhood. These case studies reflect the range of experiences of families with children in this study. Through them, I offer an analysis of how race, class, social context, and the timing of motherhood and accepting a lesbian sexuality matter for the experience of lesbian parenting. I compare the ways women understand motherhood and their lesbian identities when they become mothers in heterosexual relationships before they take on a self-definition as gay (“mothers becoming lesbians”) with the differing experiences they have when they publicly identify as lesbian before becoming a parent (“lesbians becoming mothers”). I examine these experiences through the lives of Black lesbians, who evaluate their own abilities to parent using past and current discourses on race, class, respectability, and womanhood.

Mothers who “become” gay tend to have entered into a gay identity as hetero-identified lesbians who did not experience same-sex attraction until adulthood, or as conformists who experienced same-sex desire in their younger years but did not act on that desire until adulthood (see Chapter 1). For mothers who have lived much of their childbearing years as heterosexual or as closeted lesbians, taking on an active and open lesbian identity is a separate and distinct behavior from engaging

in same-sex liaisons. These women are continuing to parent their children at the same time they are experiencing a changing sexual orientation, and embrace a lesbian sexuality after first experiencing motherhood in a heterosexual framework. Lynch suggests that previously married women who commit to gay sexuality as a permanent way of life assume a “disapproved-of identity” (2004, 94). To now parent as gay women, they must disinvest in the heterosexual privilege that accompanies their previous identity as mothers. I argue that they must also be willing to reveal themselves as sexual beings, and the experience of this transformation can be harrowing.

African American lesbians from low-income and working-class families have not amassed much privilege or authority through family background, education, or employment, so for these women, the recognition, reverence, and respect that is associated with being a heterosexual mother in Black communities—and indeed in most communities—is sometimes the only source of status they have. The acceptance and support they receive from others for being an upstanding mother can be disrupted when they reveal themselves as gay. The potential for this to happen significantly influences whether and how Black mothers go about publicly asserting a lesbian identity, and expressing their sexuality.

Women who come out as lesbian *before* entering motherhood—lesbians who become mothers—experience a different set of processes in this transition. Relative to mothers becoming lesbians, these women have the reverse experience: they assume a gay sexuality at an earlier age (in their late teens and early twenties) and first enter motherhood much later, in their late twenties or early thirties and beyond. In delaying childbearing, they are able to achieve higher levels of education and accrue more experience in the labor market. When they do become parents they have greater social resources and access to additional capital to better provide economically for their children. Because they became gay at the onset of adulthood, they have lived more of their adult lives on the margins of Black respectability. By the time they enter motherhood, therefore, they have resolved much of the uncertainty and shame associated with having a public lesbian sexuality and may have also learned to rely on other statuses, such as occupation, social class, or home ownership to garner privilege in society.

Social class, reflected not merely through education and income but also through type of college education, occupational status, and other subtle distinctions, bears an important relationship to processes of motherhood for Black lesbians. In my study, women who came out as

gay before having children are more likely to have attained middle- and upper-middle-class status by completing college, attaining degrees beyond the bachelor's, and working in high-status occupations. The most educated and most economically advantaged have the greatest choice in how to become mothers because they have more access to information about alternative insemination technologies, greater knowledge about how to effectively utilize those technologies, jobs that facilitate their use through superior insurance coverage, and extra income to pay for medical treatments. These women are more likely to have what some scholars refer to as the "choice of motherhood," meaning the ability to decide whether and when to become mothers.

Like mothers becoming lesbians, however, African American lesbians becoming mothers similarly employ discourses of Black respectability when they speak of their motherhood, and must simultaneously negotiate these expectations with the evidence of their own sexual freedom that a lesbian identity makes visible. Regardless of social class and timing of motherhood, the parenting lesbians I interviewed want to be perceived as "good mothers" despite having an open lesbian sexuality. They struggle to enact a public lesbian identity in predominantly Black social environments that discourage openly gay behavior. I proceed in this chapter with five case studies. In the first family, the respondent became a mother while in an upwardly mobile but working-class, heterosexual marital relationship. The second household involves a middle-class single mother who emigrated from Jamaica and had a child in a heterosexual dating relationship. The third case study examines the adoption process for a working-class, single mother. The fourth family is an upper-middle-class couple who had children together using alternative insemination, and the fifth family is a working-class lesbian step-family household. Together, these case studies reveal how intersections of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender presentation differentially affect parenting experiences in Black lesbian families.

MOTHERHOOD PRIOR TO TAKING ON A LESBIAN SEXUALITY

Respectability through Upward Mobility and Virtuous Black Womanhood

Jocelyn Barnum presents herself as the epitome of the successful Black woman. She describes herself as attractive, feminine, and strong, and recently purchased a home in South Jersey with her partner, Joi Jamison.

Recall that she was born in 1962 to working-class parents in the Bronx, and married her high school sweetheart in 1985 at age twenty-three, right around the time her first and only child, Issim, was born. She entered college much later, in her early thirties, going part-time for many years to complete a bachelor's degree and then received her MBA through an online university in her forties. Jocelyn describes herself as being the child whom her family thought would be most likely to make it in the way African American communities have traditionally defined success for women: the sibling who would complete her education, have a successful marriage, become a loving mother in the context of that marriage, and have a fulfilling, income-producing career. She would then use these experiences to gain entry into the world of Black middle-class life and serve as a respectable model for others to follow.

Given these expectations, it is not surprising that divorcing her husband and entering into a committed relationship with another woman were not part of the equation. Jocelyn made the decision to be openly gay rather late in life. Her pathway into a lesbian sexuality was consistent with that of hetero-identified women, as she had her first experience with same-sex desire when she was well into adulthood. She first acted on her attraction to women at age thirty while in her marriage, but it took two more years before she came to identify as a lesbian. There were several competing issues that she had to confront; all of them were interwoven with the heterosexual privilege she had amassed and would jeopardize by acting on her desires.

First, she risked losing the high status she had in her family as the role model her siblings should emulate. As the child of a Baptist minister, she knew that if she were to claim a lesbian identity it would lessen her father's authority over his congregation and bring shame to their family. Jocelyn was therefore concerned about how the public nature of her sexual identity would affect the social status her family had worked hard to build. She came into adulthood in the 1970s when rates of non-marital childbearing were rising in large urban centers like New York. The sexual behavior of low-income racial minority women like Jocelyn was under a heightened scrutiny, so this was not an ideal time for Black women and particularly Black mothers to be claiming sexual autonomy. In the context of this discourse, Jocelyn could not decide to live an openly gay life without a cost to her reputation.

Jocelyn also worried about how her relationship with her family would change after she came out. More than once, she mentioned that

her family had her “on a pedestal,” saying she was “always the one who was very slim, model-like, very adventurous, very studious.” She told me, “I had a lot of things I wanted to do in life and accomplish in life.” In Jocelyn’s mind, her family’s expectations and positive beliefs about her were tied to her heterosexuality. Neither her physical features nor her level of schooling would change by virtue of her assuming a lesbian identity, but they would lose value, she felt, when stripped of their heterosexual context. And indeed, Jocelyn’s father’s response when he learned of her interest in women was a strong and negative one. He found out from a relative, and first tried to warn Jocelyn about lesbians, saying he knew women who were “like that” when he was a numbers runner,⁹ and telling her that they “push up very, very hard [come on strong], so be careful.” But she says eventually it sunk in for him that she was romantically interested in a woman, and when the nature of their relationship was confirmed, her father became extremely hostile and threatening.¹⁰

Heterosexuality is critically important for Jocelyn’s image and self-presentation as a mother. When she was first considering whether she would take on a gay identity her son Issim was eight years old, and the fact that she was a mother made her especially careful in thinking through this decision. When her father found out she was dating a woman, one of the arguments he made against her behavior was that she was not being a good mother. For example, when Jocelyn spent a weekend at her lover’s home, she asked her sister to watch her son. Her father “tried to turn the tables and say ‘Because you’re with this woman now you can’t take care of your child.’ And it just wasn’t like that at all.” Jocelyn’s father’s comments suggest that her decision to acknowledge a gay sexuality would inevitably make her a worse mother, conjuring up an image of a hedonistic woman out to fulfill her own desires rather than her parental responsibilities. Her father’s reaction is consistent with the belief that a mother who asserts sexual autonomy and who seeks self-fulfillment through avenues other than child rearing does so at a cost to her children, whose needs she fails to meet.

I expected to find that respondents who had been heterosexually married had ended their unions specifically because they wanted to be openly gay. It turned out, however, that the majority of previously married women in my research said they ended their marriages for reasons that were not directly related to their interest in women. Jocelyn was with her husband for eight years before they married and seven years after they wed. Over that time her husband’s behavior toward her grew more

violent and disrespectful. When I asked her why her marriage ended, her response suggested that the marital breakup was the result of her husband's infidelity, domestic violence, and other negative behaviors.

After she left her marriage, Jocelyn still wanted Issim to have a relationship with his father. The fact that her experience of motherhood occurred in the context of a long-term marital relationship influenced both her expectation and her ex-husband's expectation that he would continue to be involved in Issim's life. It is noteworthy that her "fitness" for motherhood was not presented by her ex-husband as an important issue in determining custody after the separation. The assumption that Jocelyn would continue to be the primary parent did not change once Issim's father discovered that Jocelyn was in a lesbian relationship. Issim's father did not contribute very much in the way of child support, and this may be one reason why there was never a custody battle. He was not pleased about her new gay status, however, and during the first years of their separation he made his disapproval overt, constantly disparaging her to their son.

Jocelyn's transition into a gay sexuality occurred during a rough period for Issim, who was about seven years old when his parents first separated. He had to contend not only with his parents' breakup but also with the death of his paternal grandfather, to whom he was extremely close, as well as his mother's new cohabiting lesbian relationship. His mother sought counseling for him to help him through the series of family transitions they were both experiencing. Throughout this time, her relationship with Issim's father continued to be combative. She remembers: "He would say things to Issim that were just so inappropriate, that he and I should discuss, not him and Issim. His father would basically put little things in Issim's head. I mean it was like I was fighting with two people, you know, I had to deal with the father who was saying things like 'I don't know what's wrong with your mother. Is she crazy?'"

She says it was tough because her child was trying to be understanding about Jocelyn's emerging sexuality while at the same time "someone as forceful as the father was saying things to him that were so condescending about his mother." Issim, she feels, was "caught in a catch-22." Today, Jocelyn and her ex-husband are on better terms, though the relationship continues to be conflictual. Jocelyn thinks it is very important that Issim continue to have a positive relationship with his father. Issim, who is now 18 years old, talks to his father regularly and sees him on weekends. The relationship between Issim and his mother's partner grew to be solid and accepting.

Women like Jocelyn who bear children in heterosexual relationships before initiating a lesbian-identified life must make a series of choices that may appear on the surface to contradict broader societal messages about motherhood and self-sacrifice. In deciding to be openly gay, these mothers declare to the world that they are going to seek to create a life that is personally fulfilling. In making this decision, however, they alter not just their own lives but also the worlds they have constructed for their children, who have known them only as heterosexual. The mother's transition from openly heterosexual to openly homosexual also alters the family's status to one that is often stigmatized. Mothers who become lesbians must do the work of changing their identity status from heterosexual to gay while they continue to parent. Jocelyn's childhood in the church and her attempts to pursue upward mobility shaped her understanding of herself as a woman. The image she wants to portray to the world is one of a person striving for middle-class respectability, and the decision to take on a lesbian sexuality disrupts the heterosexual privilege she has managed to amass. This experience is also exemplified in Althea Payne's story, if somewhat differently.

Single-Mother Management of Motherhood and Lesbian Status

Althea Payne holds a master's degree in education administration and is an assistant dean at a Catholic high school. She was born in Jamaica, West Indies, in 1964 and lived there with her grandmother until age eight, when she moved to New York to live with her mother and stepfather. In her family, people tend not to have open discussions about their lives. Althea never discussed with her mother or any family members why her mother and biological father never married, for example, nor why she has never had a relationship with her father. When her mother married her stepfather, Althea was not invited to the wedding. No one ever told her why she was not invited, and the circumstances around the wedding remained "very hush hush." Growing up in her family, she learned that certain behaviors and activities were not to be discussed, even among close relatives.

These experiences profoundly shaped the way Althea presents herself to the outside world. She has a feminine gender presentation and came into a gay sexuality as a hetero-identified woman who developed same-sex attraction in adulthood after having serious relationships with men. She is a single mother raising a teenage daughter whom she bore in the context of a heterosexual dating relationship. Althea says of her

daughter's father, "He loved me like a woman, but I loved him like a brother. Well, not quite. But it wasn't that passionate love. It was the type of love that allowed me to see him as someone that I would like to father my child." Throughout the time they were together, she made it clear that she did not want to marry him, because although she loved him and knew that he loved her, "something wasn't enough." Althea explained: "I felt this emptiness that I couldn't name. Maybe I could name it but I was afraid to." When I asked what she would have named it, she replied: "I would have named it a need to be with a woman. And I had never been with a woman before, never been intimate. So I didn't really have any kind of frame of reference, you know. I just had that feeling. . . . We really tried to make the relationship work, and we had gone through a lot . . . but it just wasn't there, and that's why I felt imprisoned. I needed to get out. . . . Eventually I realized that I was just doing him and myself a disservice by trying to stay in something that was not fulfilling for me and therefore could not be fulfilling for him."

Althea says that her first sexual experience with a woman felt different from anything she had ever experienced with men: "It was more comfortable. That's the best way I can put it. It was like putting on a glove that fit as opposed to one that was too big or too small. And I felt just this sense of belonging." While she has had relations with women for more than ten years and has integrated her gay sexuality into her sense of self, she is very cautious about revealing her lesbian desires to members of her family of origin and to other people who have a place in her social world. Unlike all of the partnered women in this study, Althea has not openly shared with her family the fact that she only dates women. She is currently living as a single mother, but when she had a cohabiting relationship with another woman in the past, she presented the woman to her family as her roommate and best friend. When I asked Althea how she decided not to be open about her sexuality, she paused for a long time, then said: "I don't even know if it was a conscious choice or just something that I felt was better left as it was. Just looking at how society reacts to us, how family reacts, how even some friends react, that was kind of enough to keep me back. In terms of my family, they're very rooted in Christianity, so right there it's like a no-no. I mean, they may know, but it's one thing to come out and tell them and another for them to suspect. So, just the way I was brought up and how society looks at us, and also even being a mother, you know, that has a lot to do with it. So it's not just about me."

Noted scholar Makeda Silvera writes about her experiences as a Jamaican woman who is a lesbian mother raising teenage daughters. She says the costs of being openly lesbian are great, and thinks back on the times when she was heterosexual – the closeness and connection she experienced with her ethnic community. She says that in her early days as a “young lesbian Black mother” she was “shut out” by “both my Black sisters and my Black brothers,” and experienced “the silence and whispers, the homophobic remarks, the sucking of the teeth when we passed by, the sudden breaks into a degrading song about my sexuality” (1992, 313). In a different work she notes, “The presence of an ‘out’ Afro-Caribbean lesbian in our community is dealt with by suspicion and fear from both men and our heterosexual Black sisters. It brings into question the assumption of heterosexuality as the only ‘normal’ way. It forces them to acknowledge something that has always been covered up” (2008, 353).

Althea is aware of the ways openly gay and lesbian practice are received in Caribbean communities, and says this is an important factor in her decision not to be openly gay with her family members. She has felt conflicted having lesbian relationships as an adult, because she is worried about how she would be perceived by others if they were to find out. Even though she believes her mother and grandmother would still love her if she told them she is gay, she “doesn’t want to put them through that.” Instead, she adopts the relatively common strategy of “just allowing them to figure it out” by bringing the partner to family functions and other events without labeling their relationship. She says this approach is particularly common with Blacks and with Caribbeans, who believe: “Just be what you want to be but don’t walk around waving a flag or anything else like that. Just keep it to yourself, in a sense. I do get the sense that most people would be more comfortable with that.”

Althea identifies her religion and her Jamaican culture as particular barriers preventing her from leading an openly gay life. She was raised in a conservative Pentecostal church that views homosexuality as a sin. She said that Jamaicans consider gay sexuality to be “extremely taboo,” and the language they use to define homosexual activity is also negative. Just to be called “lesbian” is disparaging, and she says, “In Patois it sounds so much worse, you know, the word ‘lesbian,’ and maybe that’s their intention for it to sound, you know, really twisted.” Althea and her daughter live in a section of Brooklyn that is predominantly West Indian. She finds that being gay in Caribbean communities is “quite difficult. Probably more difficult than in any other community,” and she believes

the reason has to do with the fact that most Caribbeans are brought up in the church with a belief system “that does not include and is quite against homosexuality.”¹¹

Existing discourses about homosexuality and lesbian motherhood not only affect a person’s decision to take on a public identity as gay but also significantly impact their approach to parenting. One of Althea’s many concerns in integrating a public lesbian identity into her existing presentation of herself as a middle-class, virtuous mother is the negative effects she thinks living an openly gay life would have on her daughter, Ophelia, and on their relationship. She explained: “I was concerned about how it would impact my daughter. I didn’t want her to feel different. I didn’t want her to feel like an outcast. I just didn’t want her to have to go through anything other than what I knew that she would go through as a child, as a Black girl growing up. I knew that she would have enough to contend with, and I really did not want to add to that. If there was any way that I could make it easy on her, I was going to. And my keeping this to myself was, I thought, one way to avoid additional pain.”

Ulysse (1999), in her discussion of class and color in Jamaica, points to the rigid policing of social status there, particularly for those who are upwardly mobile. The middle-class standard of gendered behavior among Jamaican woman is strongly linked historically to skin color and occupational status. While Althea’s dark-complexion might be perceived as a liability in her country of origin, here in the United States she has achieved middle-class status through her education and employment. She has the “look” that is valued by the middle class in New York: she wears her hair short and relaxed, and she dresses stylishly in tailored suits and high-heeled shoes that tastefully flatter her slender frame.

Though Althea keeps her sexuality private, her daughter did eventually discover it. Althea describes with some pain the way in which this happened. In Althea’s mind, the problems that ensued stemmed from her own reluctance to confront the situation head-on by letting her child know the circumstances of her relationship. When Ophelia was thirteen years old, Althea’s partner, Pamela, moved into their home. This was not Althea’s first cohabiting relationship. When Ophelia was much younger, they had lived for several years with a man who was “like a father” to Ophelia. And after that, when Ophelia was still young, they shared an apartment with a different female partner. Althea says that neither of those relationships had a negative impact on Oph-

elia because “she was younger, so there was still all that innocence going on.” Ophelia had not been aware of the nature of her mother’s lesbian sexuality, and the cohabiting experiences were positive ones.

When Pamela moved in, by contrast, Ophelia had just begun adolescence. At this time, Althea and Pamela had been dating for about a year and a half. Pamela was friendly with Ophelia, tutoring her in math and spending some evenings at their home. When Pamela formally moved into the household, Althea followed her accustomed pattern of silence around personal matters. She did not let her daughter know about her gay sexuality and did not share with her the nature of her relationship with Pamela. Althea did not see the problems brewing as a result of this decision: “Maybe I didn’t realize just how much of my attention she [Ophelia] needed, and maybe Ophelia realized that she wanted it when she saw it going elsewhere. You know, there were a lot of things going on, but the point is we were all living together here, and I did not make it a point to sit down with my daughter and talk to her about what was going on. And so she became resentful, started acting out, started cutting school. Staying away, running away practically, not coming home at night. And that was a major problem. A *major* problem.” One evening, the situation reached a breaking point. Althea had come home from work and Ophelia was nowhere to be found. She went around the neighborhood to her friends’ houses and to a local restaurant to see if she could find her. Althea remembers:

And it’s funny how it happened, because we were in the street not far from here, and I think I must have just tracked her down one evening because I was looking for her. And we were walking on the street and she’s crying, and I’m trying to get her to calm down and come home. And then she said something. She was referring to one of her friends, and she made some reference to her friend saying that she thought that I was gay. . . . I guess in talking to her friends and telling them, “Oh she’s living with so and so,” her friends put two and two together, and at that point I said, “I am gay, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t love you. And I’m sorry that you’re going through all this pain.” And I tried to smooth it over as much as I could at that moment, at that time, but I see that the damage had been done. And just looking back, I would have done it differently.

The circumstances under which Althea shared the news of her sexuality and the nature of her cohabiting relationship with her daughter were fraught with emotion, confusion, and disbelief. Althea also had strong feelings of guilt, seeing her lesbian sexuality as something that caused her daughter much inner turmoil. She acknowledges that a large part of

the problem was her silence around the nature of her relationship, her refusal to be forthright with her daughter and her reluctance to talk openly with Ophelia about how their relationship might be affected by Pamela's presence in the home. Althea also felt guilty, however, because she had not foreseen the problems that would erupt. As a good mother, she felt she should have anticipated her daughter's feelings and been able to provide an acceptable remedy. When I asked Althea how Ophelia responded to learning about her mother's sexuality, she answered: "She didn't accept it right away. She may have known in her own little mind before her friend even said anything but was unable or unwilling to grasp it." Our conversation continued:

I: Did Ophelia's behavior toward [Pamela] change after you shared that with her?

Althea: Yeah, she seemed to dislike [Pamela] even more. More resentful.

I: That's common with teenage girls. At that time it's very hard.

Althea: I guess I didn't see it. I didn't see it coming for whatever reason.

I: Well how would you know? You hadn't had that experience before with a teenager.

Althea: I know, but as a mother you're kind of expected to know these things *before* they happen.

Research shows that parent relationship transitions are particularly challenging for adolescents (Bray 1999). Even when there is full disclosure about the nature of parents' relationships with new partners, there is often a rough period of transition, and children—particularly teenagers—tend to respond with acts of rebellion (Bray and Kelly 1998; Hetherington 1989; Nicholson et al. 2008). Some work suggests that marital transitions are especially difficult on the mother-daughter relationship when the expectations of closeness are compromised by the presence of the mother's new female partner (Coleman, Troilo, and Jamison 2008). Daughters in single-parent households may also be used to having more of a peer relationship with their mothers, which can be disrupted by the mother's new partner. Research on heterosexual re-partnered mothers reports some of the same conflicts that Althea experienced. Papernow (2008) finds, for example, that the mother-child relationship competes with the mother's new marital relationship in ways that force her to choose one

bond over the other. Similarly, Weaver and Coleman (2010) describe heterosexual mothers in re-partnered households as feeling split, pulled in more than one direction, or confused as to where their loyalties should lie.

Gay parents do not necessarily see the connection between their experiences and the experiences of heterosexual stepfamilies, however. And Althea, who already felt guilty about having a relationship that would force her concentration away from her daughter, felt doubly bad because the relationship was with a woman, and therefore stigmatizing for herself and her daughter. Silvera, writing about her own experiences of lesbian motherhood as a Jamaican woman, says her two daughters changed the way they felt about her sexuality once they became teenagers. While the parenting she and her partner gave was warmly received when the children were younger, once they entered adolescence it seemed as though “all the bonding, all the warm comfort, love, security, never was” (1992, 317). Silvera poignantly describes the hurt felt by her daughters’ changed feelings toward her, saying “Dealing with the culture’s hatred towards lesbianism and lesbian parenting is frustrating, tiring, but dealing with one’s children’s unspoken homophobia is painful” (318).

After Althea told her daughter about her relationship with Pamela, Althea became intensely focused on how that experience was affecting her bond with Ophelia. She says her daughter still had a lot of anger toward her and toward Pamela, and Althea was not able to think about anything other than mending her relationship with Ophelia: “As a matter of fact I had to just kind of like push everything aside and focus on her, to just repair the damage that had been done. And that actually meant not giving my attention to anyone else.” When I noted how difficult it must have been for Althea to focus entirely on her daughter’s needs to the detriment of her own, she responded: “It was difficult, but I saw it as something that I needed to do. I saw it as just having messed up, so now damage control was on my agenda.” Althea asked Pamela to move out of the home because she thought that would be the best way to repair her relationship with Ophelia. Soon after, the relationship between Althea and Pamela dissolved.

Althea’s response to her daughter’s difficulty in coming to terms with her lesbian union was to end her relationship. In her mind, her lesbian relationship was an attempt to seek pleasure for herself, whereas her understanding of motherhood is that it requires altruism and selflessness. Lewin (1993) says this is a common dilemma for lesbian mothers and that the separation between “mother” and “lesbian” as elements of one’s identity can be sharply drawn for women who want to maintain

secrecy about their sexual orientation. What is also clearly present here is Althea's understanding of the expectations within Black communities that sexuality, and particularly behavior labeled as deviant, be invisible and submerged into private spaces only. Black feminist scholars illuminate this point. Evelyn Hammonds, for example, states that public discourse on Black motherhood has historically been shaped by processes that pathologize Black women, and these also help to produce the submersion and silence of their sexuality (2004, 303). I argue that lesbian mothers must combat ideological contestations that deny Black women's sexuality altogether, as well as contestations that pathologize specific forms of sexuality. Althea's example suggests that women who have entered motherhood before coming out as gay evaluate their performance as mothers through a heterosexual lens and absorb cultural understandings of good motherhood in ways that make it difficult for them to view their lesbian sexuality in a positive light.

Reaching what one study refers to as "developmental milestones" in the coming out process while parenting offers a qualitatively different experience for the woman who already has children (Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum 2002). The parent must not only work through any feelings of negative self-worth around the possibility that she might be gay and any fear about what a lesbian identity will mean for herself, she must also consider how this shift in her sexual identity will affect her child. She may experiment with gender presentation, go on dates with women, and experience her first same-sex cohabiting relationship. All of these transitions take place in the home, and the child experiences them on some level with the parent. The multiple transitions can be problematic, particularly when there are few resources to help families process these changes.

Jocelyn's and Althea's stories tell us several things about how mothers come to terms with a new lesbian identity. First, mothers who experience this transition are likely to be concerned about taking on a status that is perceived to be shameful by members of their families and communities, particularly because this shift disrupts the definition of "good mother" and "respectable behavior" they currently have. Hays (1996) says a logic of "unselfish nurturing" guides the behavior of middle-class mothers, even while a logic of "self-interested gain" guides our behavior in so many other areas of life, and this is the cultural contradiction of contemporary motherhood.¹² Others studying marginalized mothers would add that the history of denigration around Black women's sexuality makes African American mothers particularly sensitive about how

they are perceived and whether they are conforming to society's standards of acceptable behavior.¹³

Women who become mothers in a heterosexual context and who are middle class or striving to achieve middle-class status are particularly sensitive to the possibility that their decision to live openly as lesbians will be interpreted as a selfish one. Althea continues to believe that to be a good parent she must distance herself from any public identification with lesbian sexuality. She extends this reasoning to other areas of her life, believing that to be close to her family, to be treated with respect at work, and to be a good Christian woman, she must keep her sexuality quiet, treating it as a behavior discretely enacted rather than as a visible component of who she is as a person. Lewin argues that for lesbians, "demanding the right to be a mother suggests a repudiation of gender conventions that define 'mother' and 'lesbian' as inherently incompatible identities, the former natural and intrinsic to women, organized around altruism, the latter unnatural and organized around self-indulgence" (1994, 350). As Lewin suggests, taking on a lesbian identity, particularly for women who are already mothers, is a movement toward personal autonomy. But to place motherhood at the center of one's identity often involves simultaneously placing other aspects of the self, most notably lesbianism, at the margins.

In other ways, however, some mothers who become lesbians are able to break away from essentialist expectations of motherhood through their experiences of living an openly gay life. Jocelyn Barnum married her first lesbian partner and had an elaborate wedding in the 1990s, though gay marriage was not legally recognized in New York at that time. She recently remarried, and has joined a social networking organization of professional Black women in her neighborhood. She proudly refers to Joi as her "wife," and the group of mostly heterosexual women to which she belongs is enthusiastic about Jocelyn's participation in various aspects of community life. Jocelyn actively sought to strike a balance between the self-interest required to claim her lesbian sexuality and the selflessness expected of mothers. In doing so, she forges a space for lesbian motherhood in her Black community—one more often occupied by Black women who become mothers after their identity as lesbians has been already comfortably established.

INTENTIONAL VERSUS SITUATIONAL MOTHERING FOR LESBIANS WHO BECOME MOTHERS

Twenty-nine of the sixty-six parenting women began parenting after coming out as gay, and children entered their families in a wider range of ways than did the children of mothers who “became” lesbians. Thirteen are lesbian stepparents, meaning they live in households with a partner and her biological child, and the remaining sixteen became mothers through adoption, alternative insemination, co-parenting with a partner, or heterosexual intercourse after taking on a lesbian identity. Whereas mothers who became lesbians had children at an average age of twenty-one and decided they were “exclusively or predominantly lesbian” much later, at twenty-eight, the pattern is almost reversed for lesbians who became mothers: this group of women first became mothers much later, at age thirty-three, but came out much earlier, at nineteen years old on average.

Women who began to parent after taking on a lesbian sexuality did so after becoming established in their careers and were more likely to be middle- or upper-middle-class. Those with advanced degrees and high status jobs are the most likely to have used alternative insemination techniques to have children and to parent as legal co-mothers through adoption. Those with bachelor’s degrees or some college but no degree tended to be in lower-middle-class or working-class occupations and became mothers in more varied ways. Taking on the status of mother as a lesbian is a very different process than taking on the status of lesbian as a mother. The cases in the next section identify three experiences of motherhood for the women in this study: intentional mothering through adoption of kin, intentional mothering through alternative insemination in a lesbian relationship, and situational mothering as a stepparent. The cases show how race, class, gender presentation, and ideologies about parenthood influence these experiences.

Intentional Mothering and Norms of Responsibility in Motherhood

When Jackie Roberts responded to my request for an interview, I was intrigued. Jackie said she was the mother of a seven-year-old boy named Andrew, and when I met him I could definitely see a resemblance. Jackie piqued my interest because she is someone I would classify as straight-up gay. She is a masculine-identified woman who says she has always desired

feminine women; she had her first lesbian relationship at age fourteen. She sees her sexuality as an essential part of herself. Based on my observations of other lesbian mothers in the study, I would not have expected straight-up gay women like Jackie who came out as lesbian at such an early age to have borne a child through heterosexual intercourse—and in fact she had not. Jackie, it turned out, is the adoptive mother of one of her sister's biological children.

Before I interviewed Jackie, I expected her story to be primarily about her experiences as a mother who is masculine-identified. I found, however, that the most salient obstacles for her as a parent concern the day-to-day survival of herself and her immediate and extended family. Jackie's story resonates with the experiences of thousands of other women of color living in the poor urban neighborhoods of yesterday and today. Children raised in harsh urban environments encounter drugs, crime, and violence not only in their neighborhoods but also in their households, and these conditions threaten their survival. The story of Jackie's route to motherhood is a story of her struggle to foster the survival of her family and community by ensuring the survival of her family's children—behavior that Collins identifies as a “fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women's motherwork” (2004b, 49).

Jackie was born into chaotic circumstances in 1962. She has lived her entire life in West Harlem, and during the 1960s and 1970s that area of New York was in many respects characterized by poverty, crime, and drug trafficking. Jackie reports that her mother was “in and out of the house” in violent relationships with men and engaged in drug and alcohol abuse; her grandmother raised Jackie, her brother, and her sister “from birth.” Of her three siblings, Jackie is the only one who has managed to live an economically independent adult life. Her brother left home at age thirteen and returned periodically to visit the family until he died in 1993 from complications relating to AIDS. Her sister, Latrice, had her first child at age twenty-one, a second child at age twenty-three, and a third child at age twenty-five. Around the time she had her second child, Latrice fell madly in love with the father of this child, who was a drug dealer. He introduced Latrice to crack cocaine. Latrice now has a total of five children and remains addicted to drugs.¹⁴ Her other four children live with various family members or have been adopted by non-kin through the court system.

Despite the chaos of her family life, Jackie managed to graduate from college with a bachelor's degree. She currently works as an officer in the New York City Department of Corrections. Leaving home to attend

school gave her a legitimate excuse for not having to assume any major responsibilities in her family, particularly the care of her sister and her sister's children. She says:

I went away to college. I just did not want to stay in that household and try to go to school at the same time, because my grandmother was working, so she expected me to take care of my sister and keep an eye on her, and go to school, and help her with the household and everything. And I couldn't see myself doing that because there were too many distractions for me as far as the streets were concerned. . . . I went to SUNY New Paltz, and when I told my grandmother, she begged me not to go. She was like, "What am I gonna do without you?" I was the oldest, I was her right hand. And at that point it became, "You know what? If I stay here, I am not going anywhere in my life." That was a decision that I had to make and stick to, and that's what I did. I went away to college, and my grandmother would call me and say, "Oh your sister—" [and I would tell her,] "I am not interested in hearing it. I didn't have a child—call her mother."

Jackie's remarks suggest that myriad "pull factors" attempting to keep her in a poor economic and family situation might have prevented her from completing college and creating a stable life for herself. They also foreshadow her constant struggle to distance herself from the mothering needs of her family members in order to live an independent life. As the oldest, Jackie was responsible for caring for her brother and sister "for the majority of the time that [they] were growing up," and Latrice still looks to her as a mother figure. When she returned home from college, Jackie felt intense pressure to help her family and to relieve some of the many responsibilities her grandmother had taken on. At the same time, she could feel the pull of the streets and the temptation of drugs, as well as other contextual conditions that threatened to keep her from meeting her goal of attaining stability and independence. This was particularly the case after her grandmother's death. Jackie thinks of her grandmother as the glue that bound the family together, and she says her grandmother raised her to take over that role. Jackie did not want the job, but she wound up taking it on anyway.

Jackie became mother to her son, Andrew, when he was two weeks old. This was not her first experience parenting a child, however. In addition to taking on a parenting role for her siblings, Jackie took in her sister Latrice's first child for a short time while living in her grandmother's apartment in Harlem, though she eventually turned over the parenting of this child to her grandmother. By the time Jackie was thirty-two, Latrice had become the mother of two more children. When Latrice at-

tempted suicide and was taken to the hospital, Jackie was awarded temporary custody of her two nieces. After her sister was released from the hospital, she returned to drugs, and Jackie felt pressure to continue the custody arrangement. She kept the children and parented them for about a month, but she says a combination of factors resulted in a traumatic outcome for the children and for herself:

The apartment above me was a friend of my sister's, and she [Latrice] would be upstairs partying with this girl . . . and everybody is partying all night long, and I'm working and I got two kids. And of course because they were raised in a household where there was no structure, they was 'buck wild!' . . . The one-year-old was constantly crying and whining and wanting to stay up all night. The three-year-old would curse me out. . . . So I told my sister, this was like a month afterwards, and I am like, "This is crazy." I told her, "If you don't take your kids back, you are going to go into the system and get them, because I don't want no kids."

And she didn't come get them. And the hardest thing I think I've had to do in my whole life was give up those two girls. And I took them down to DCW [Department of Child Welfare]. . . . The scene there, the oldest one was pulling on my legs and she's screaming, "Don't leave me." And the baby, because she sees her screaming, she's screaming, and I'm crying. When I came home, the only thing I wanted to do was kill my sister. Why should I have to be subjected to that? Well, she never went and got them. So they were adopted [into the foster care system].

And at one point, the foster mother was like, "Oh, I'll let you stay in contact with them." But the social worker didn't like me, so she was telling this woman all kinds of stuff [about me], and . . . the next time I went to visit my nieces, the social worker was like, "She doesn't want you to have any contact with the girls anymore." I had sent a money order for my niece's birthday because any birthday, Christmas, or whatever, I always make sure that they have [something]. Well, they sent me the check back and told me that she wanted no contact with me. And that was something that I had to deal with and accept.

After that experience, Jackie was overcome with a range of emotions, including guilt for not wanting to care for her nieces and being denied any further contact with them once they were in the child protective services system, anger at her sister and mother for not having the capacity to care for the children, and remorse for not being able to be the pillar of strength her family needed. After she gave up the children, Jackie became what she calls a "functional addict." She says, "I came from a family of alcoholics and addicts, and that's what I fell right into, even though I had completed college—I was the first one in my family to get my GED, the first person to graduate from college. But

besides all of that, I used drugs.” At some point, she says, she realized, “I was losing track of who Jackie was, and that for me was more devastating than anything else.” When I asked for the signs that she was losing herself, she replied: “It wasn’t something that was very overt. One day I got up after getting high, I looked into the mirror and I didn’t know who was looking back at me. I just didn’t recognize *me*. I felt like it was a demon looking at me back out of the mirror, and . . . at that point, I went to work and I told my boss, ‘I need some help.’ I went to rehab, and I came out and I started going to AA meetings.” Jackie says she realized she had to make a change to avoid going down the same path as her mother and sister. About one year after she stopped using drugs, she got the call about Andrew.

Andrew is Latrice’s fourth biological child. When Andrew was born, Jackie would visit him in the hospital, sit with him, and feed him. Soon after one of her visits, she received a call from the hospital saying a urine test revealed cocaine in his system and asking whether she was interested in taking custody of the baby. A number of emotions flooded through her. Even though she told the hospital she needed time to think it over, she said she knew immediately that she would take him, in part to make up for relinquishing her nieces to the child welfare system—an act she still felt guilty about. At this point, she was at a different stage in her life: assuming responsibility for Andrew was, she says, “something that I have chosen to do, not something that was put upon me.” She explains: “That’s my nephew. That’s my blood. I fed him when I went to the hospital, and he had big, big eyes, and he looked at me like, ‘Don’t let her [Latrice] keep me. You have to help me. Think about your nieces. Think about my sisters.’”

Adopting a child born to a drug-addicted mother has created more stress than Jackie had ever imagined it would, despite her previous experiences with parenting. The difficulties have included the typical financial worries that single mothers often have, among them finding affordable, adequate daycare; battling unexpected ear infections and other illnesses; and sleep deprivation. She also describes having many of the same concerns that other working parents face: feeling that there is not enough time in the day to spend with her son, or trying to figure out how to get him to go to bed at a reasonable hour and to sleep in his own bed.

But Jackie also talks about the joys of having a son. According to Jackie, Andrew has her “wrapped around his little finger. . . . I’m just a sucker for him. He gets me each and every time.” She does not consider

herself a nurturing person, but she is very affectionate with Andrew. She explains: "I feel that children are supposed to be hugged and kissed. I mean, if Andrew doesn't know anything else, even though I know sometimes he thinks I am the meanest person in the whole world, he also knows that I love him. And I feel that when you have a child, you have to give him that. . . . I buy him—he has everything in the world that he can [have.] . . . I grew up in a household where I couldn't have certain things because my grandmother couldn't afford to give them to me. What did I do? I went in the street. He doesn't have to do that because I give him [everything]. And working for parole, I see so many young Black men come through parole where it is like, 'What went wrong? What happened?' So with Andrew, I look at Andrew and I know that right now it is on me to mold who he is."

Andrew's life with Jackie involves a weekday routine of school, afternoon child care, homework, dinner, bath, and bedtime. His biological mother, paternal grandmother and other paternal relatives, and three siblings (two of Latrice's children and a brother through Andrew's father) also remain in his life. Jackie skillfully navigates herself and Andrew through this intricate web of familial relationships. Andrew has a biological sister living in a foster home in Brooklyn who Jackie regularly checks in on through phone calls and pictures, sometimes taking Andrew and his fourteen-year-old brother, Samuel, to visit. Samuel is Andrew's oldest brother who was first raised by Jackie's grandmother; after her passing, he went to live with his biological father. From time to time, Samuel comes for sleepovers at Jackie and Andrew's home. During one such visit, Samuel told Andrew that Jackie was their aunt and that they shared the same biological mother. When Andrew asked Jackie about it, Jackie told him: "Well, Latrice did give birth to you, yes, that is true. But I'm the mommy, okay. I'm that one that when you don't feel good, I'm there. When you want something from the store, you come to me. Regardless of whatever, Andrew, I'm your aunt, but I'm your mother, and I love you as much as anyone's mother could. So I don't care what Samuel told you, I am your mommy." Andrew replied, "So that means I have two mommies." Jackie replied, "Yes, that's exactly what it means." In reply, Andrew said "Okay," and, as Jackie remembers, "that was the end of that."

Not everyone accepted Jackie's status as Andrew's mother so easily. "With Andrew, they gave me *hell* to get him because of my sexuality"; this comment is Jackie's summary of her experiences navigating the child adoption agency. Jackie was assigned a social worker as part

of the process of adopting her nephew. He was a West Indian man, and Jackie thinks his ethnicity had something to do with his negative reaction to her once he discovered her sexuality. Although Jackie was living alone at the time she adopted Andrew, she had a girlfriend who was very feminine looking. Jackie has a transgressive gender presentation, but is also slim, with light skin and soft, long, dreadlocked hair. Men often find her attractive. During the social worker's first visit, he looked at her and suggestively remarked, "Oh, I think you'll make a lovely parent."

During his second visit, however, he noticed a photo of Jackie and her girlfriend sitting on the coffee table. He looked at the picture, turned around and looked at Jackie, returned his gaze to the picture, and then began criticizing the home and suggesting that Jackie would not be a fit parent. He questioned why she had not installed window guards. He asked how she knew she would not put Andrew back in the system, since she had given up her two nieces after saying she would care for them. At the end of this meeting, he said, "Well, I don't know. I don't think this [the adoption] would be a very good idea." At this point, Jackie was working as a parole officer and knew how to navigate the complicated bureaucracy of the New York child welfare system. She began making phone calls to agencies to learn her rights. When the social worker returned for a third visit, he said something that was offensive to Jackie, and she confronted him head-on, saying, "You know what? Right now, I really don't like the way that you are speaking to me, and I'm telling you that I'm feeling uncomfortable, and that does not happen where I pay rent. So I'm asking you to leave."

Jackie made an appointment to meet with her social worker's supervisor. During that interview, she told the supervisor (whom she describes as a Black American woman): "This is my nephew. This is my blood. Not you, not this man, not anyone in this world that's of a mortal nature can tell me that I can't have this child." The supervisor looked at her and told her, "You know what? I think you'll be an excellent mother!" When the social worker returned to Jackie's house with Andrew in tow, she says: "Oh, he was heated. He literally, literally threw him in my arms! I looked at him and said, 'See, I told you—you can't stop what's meant to be.'" He replied, "You know what you are doing is wrong" [referring to Jackie's sexuality]. Jackie responded, "Let me tell you something: If I had a tape recorder, your agency would be paying me for that remark. Trust what I am saying to you." And he stomped out the door.

The series of confrontations Jackie had with both social workers concerned judgments about whether her sexuality, and specifically her

gender presentation, made her unfit to be a mother. Her impassioned plea at the supervisor's office, however, was taken as evidence of her fitness for motherhood. Other factors that might have also helped deflect the potentially negative impact of her gender presentation have to do with Latrice's absence, drug addiction, and the number of times she had borne children and put them into the child welfare system. Jackie's economic self-sufficiency, combined with her fierce interest in and love for Andrew, outweighed any negative impact of having a lesbian identity in the agency's final decision-making process. The problems of Andrew's biological mother had lessened the stigma of Jackie's openly gay sexuality.

In describing the relationship African American women have historically had with portrayals of their own sexuality, Black feminist scholars identify themes of Black womanhood that may be enacted differently according to social class. While poor, working-class, and middle-class Black women share a narration of having always to defend their sexuality and morality as women, as partners, and as mothers, they may have different experiences around the expression of sexual agency. Middle-class Black women have a long history of resisting dominant and hegemonic constructions of Black sexuality as licentious with a "politics of silence" around their sexual behavior, as I elaborated on earlier (see Introduction). They perceive a need to "protect the sanctity of inner aspects of Black women's lives" with an image of super-morality.¹⁵ In contrast, Brown (1994) and others note that while some working-class Black women also conform to the politics of respectability with a silence around issues relating to sexuality, others resist losing their sexual agency or an articulation of their sexuality. Davis (1998) argues that Black working-class women's model of womanhood emphasizes strength, resilience, and autonomy in all areas of their lives. She identifies Black working-class music as a site that reveals these women's capability of exercising agency in choosing their partners, and shows their rejection of sexual passivity as a defining characteristic of womanhood. Jackie's refusal to closet her sexuality, even in the face of authority figures that have a heightened interest in her sexuality as it relates to motherhood, supports this alternative notion of Black womanhood that articulates a sense of sexual autonomy.¹⁶

When Jackie is with her son, she says, she cannot and does not want to separate her status as lesbian from her sense of herself as a parent. She sees herself as being both a mother and a father to her child. Most single parents, regardless of their sexuality, feel that the absence of a partner means they have to fulfill the traditional roles of both mother

and father. But there was some suggestion in Jackie's interview that she thinks more concretely than most single parents about how to accomplish this in her relationship with Andrew. On the one hand, she describes behaviors with her son that might be construed as female-gendered. She laughingly remarks, "Andrew is like my husband." She prides herself on being very affectionate with Andrew and admits to acquiescing to his requests for extra toys and games. Interactions of this type are typically associated with mothers: she is emotionally responsive and concerned about Andrew's immediate well-being, stresses the emotional security she brings to their relationship, and works at maintaining Andrew's ties with his biological siblings and other relatives.

On the other hand, Jackie also feels responsible for molding Andrew into a good man, and she attempts to do this through behaviors associated in the developmental psychology literature with father-child interaction. Some of the actions I observed Jackie and Andrew engaging in, along with her description of the activities they participate in on a typical weekend, suggest she is a strong disciplinarian and is physical in her play with him. When I asked Jackie if seven year-old Andrew knows she is gay, she replied, "Andrew knows I'm something! I don't think he fully understands, but yeah." She says she does not hide her sexuality from him, but she is also very careful about bringing home dates—not because she is reluctant to expose her lesbian sexuality to Andrew but because she wants to model responsible sexual behavior. Jackie is concerned about how she may influence Andrew's attitudes toward women as he grows up (she assumes he will be heterosexual). She explained:

When he was younger, women have spent the night at my house. I don't let that happen when Andrew is home now, because my thing is if I have different women sleeping at my house, in my bed, Andrew is going to think it's okay to do that. You know, I'm single. It's no way for me to—I am not going to even try to justify my behavior, but I know that I don't necessarily want him to have the type of attitude that it is okay to sleep with 50 million different women. That's why I don't show him that. . . . I don't have women jumping in and out of my bed because for me at this particular point in my life . . . I know what [sex] is about. So, for him, if it's going to be about him respecting women when he grows up, then I have to also show respect towards women. I can't make it seem like, "Oh, yeah well I had this one, I had that one" and then expect him to think that it's wrong to do that.

Jackie sees her task as a parent who dates women as one that involves modeling healthy, respectful relationships with women, and her

remarks indicate that her sense of sexual agency and approach to modeling respectable womanhood differ from the politics of silence expressed by middle- and upper-middle-class Black women. Jackie's actions are also consistent with studies of father-child relationships that show that fathers contribute to children's development often by acting as "advisors, social guides, and rule providers," and these types of interactions enhance children's self-esteem.¹⁷ Jackie thinks it is important to teach her son how to interact in a positive way with women, and she wants to present behaviors in her dating relationships that reflect this ideal to him. While she is not exactly socializing her son to understand "maleness," this aspect of her parenting style implies that there may be opportunities for children to experience both maternal and paternal interactive styles in lesbian-headed households. Certainly, the gender socialization of children in lesbian-headed households warrants further exploration.¹⁸

That lesbians like Jackie choose motherhood despite difficult family and environmental circumstances and against societal odds reveals the strong intentionality of motherhood for these women. Contextual factors, as well as a tradition of kinship care and tightly woven interfamilial relationships, have dictated their course toward parenthood more strongly than innate or intense personal desires to mother. These women perceive a *social responsibility* to mother based on other callings from relationships and familial obligations, and these are crucial to consider when defining and explaining lesbian motherhood. The experiences of women like Jackie are not captured in research that limits the study of lesbian motherhood to biological mothers.

Upbringing and personal history also strongly influence experiences of lesbian motherhood. One strong motivating factor behind Jackie's decision to assume responsibility for Andrew was her wish that he not have to experience childhood with an unstable mother as she and her siblings did. In Andrew's case, there was no grandmother to take on the parental role. As the eldest grandchild, Jackie was used to helping her grandmother as an additional stabilizing force in the family, and this was a position she reluctantly assumed more fully once her grandmother passed away. This suggests that sometimes the relationships and connections individuals have built with their family members serve as the impetus for motherhood. Thus far Jackie's sexuality has presented only a minor challenge to her parenting. Her challenges, rather, have involved the important contexts of race, family structure, and the social ills associated with poverty.

Intentional Mothering as Biological Moms and Co-mothers

It was a crisp afternoon in November when I arrived at the home of Nyla Ransom, Zora Hammond, and their three sons. The childhood poverty experiences of both women in this household represent the family backgrounds of two-thirds of the African American women I studied. Zora was born in 1961, and grew up in West Harlem in a low-income, multi-generational household. She entered into a gay sexuality through the straight-up gay pathway described in Chapter 1 and has a gender presentation that hovers between gender-blender and transgressive. Nyla, also born in 1961, was raised in housing projects in a different northeastern city with her alcoholic mother and a father who was in and out of the family. She fits into the conformist pathway of lesbian sexuality, having experienced same-sex attraction in her teenage years but initially not believing that she could or should act on those desires. Nyla's feminine gender presentation complements Zora's less feminine display. But in important ways this couple's present-day lives also resemble many middle-class White lesbian-headed families: both attended elite private colleges and have high-status occupations, and both had a child (or, in Zora's case, twins) in the context of their relationship using alternative insemination techniques. This family shares a large brownstone in Brooklyn, and the house has lots of character, with tall windows, narrow hallways, and steep staircases. It has the lived-in feel often found in households with several kids, two working parents, and no paid housekeeper.

Zora's and Nyla's route to lesbian motherhood involved an intricate web of overlapping paths. The two first met in college in the early 1980s and dated secretly for three years while remaining integrated into various aspects of Black heterosexual life on their predominantly White college campus. Zora even pledged a historically Black sorority. They were inseparable as lovers ("best friends" to the outside world) until senior year, when Zora says that they both felt about their relationship, "This is like a college thing, I can't be doing this at home, you know. Can't take this out of here, can't take this off campus!" After this realization, they each went their separate ways, Nyla to a heterosexual cohabiting relationship with a Black middle-class businessman and Zora to a life of casually dating women. They continued to see each other as "friends," occasionally getting together for intimate liaisons. After three years, they renewed their romantic relationship and decided to make it a permanent one; they have been together ever since.

Nyla and Zora have been moms for many years, in many ways, to several children. Earlier in their relationship, they spent seven years as full-time parents to Nyla's two godsons when the children's biological mother was having difficulties and could not care for them. Nyla says that the experience of raising children was pretty stressful at times, but it also confirmed for them that they wanted to have children of their own. They are currently raising three sons: twin six-year-olds birthed by Zora and a ten-month-old whom Nyla bore. All three of their children were conceived through the *in vitro* insemination process using sperm from an anonymous Black donor.¹⁹ Their upper-middle-class occupations have afforded them great health insurance plans, as well as additional savings to help pay for these procedures. Their options for donors were rather limited because they wanted Black sperm, and banks have limited numbers of African American donors.²⁰ They knew of another African American lesbian couple also looking for a Black sperm donor, and this further reduced the pool of potential donors since they did not want their children to have the same biological father as their friends' children.

Zora has always wanted to be a mother. She says: "I just think that for me it just all makes sense for who I am. I don't have an ideology or philosophy about what lesbians do, like there's a handbook, the lesbian handbook—okay, page 1, section 23, can't have children, or you should have children. . . . I just live my life in the way that best suits me and my family. And for me, my life was incomplete without children. . . . Children are not for everybody. There are heterosexual couples that choose to be childless, and that's fine. But I don't think that I should have to forgo that because I happen to be a lesbian."

Though Zora mentioned several times in her interview that she has always wanted children, she still felt some apprehension about having a child as an openly gay woman. She remarked: "I think for me the decision to have biological children was a tough one. The reason I had children so late was because I really wasn't sure if wanted to do it, because I knew it would be a difficult situation for the children more so than me. I didn't want my children to be ostracized or treated a certain way because of me and the choices that I made. But the truth of the matter is that there's always going to be something. . . . You can look at any group of people and say why they shouldn't have children."

Zora's remarks highlight the complex negotiation that lesbians who become mothers make between convention, personal desire, and selfless regard for their children. Lewin (1994) notes that for women who decide

to become mothers once their identification as lesbians is firm, the process of becoming a mother demands agency. At the same time, to the degree that wanting to be a mother is perceived as a natural desire, one unmediated by culture or politics, becoming a mother permits a lesbian to move into a more natural or normal status than she otherwise has. In this sense, becoming a mother represents a step toward conformity with conventional gender expectations. But to the extent that it means overcoming the equation of homosexuality with unnaturalness, this transformation allows the lesbian mother to resist gendered constructions of sexuality. Lewin says this act of resistance is paradoxically achieved through compliance with conventional expectations for women, so it may also be construed as a gesture of accommodation (1994, 349).

Both Nyla and Zora wanted to experience conceiving, carrying to term, and giving birth to a child. Each woman adopted the other's biological child shortly after birth, so together they are the legal parents of all three children. The boys call them both "mommy" or, if they need to distinguish between them, by their names. Even though Nyla and Zora both consider themselves full and complete parents of all three children, they also agree that the experience of giving birth to a child produced a qualitatively different feeling than they initially had toward the child or children whom they adopted. When I asked Nyla, the biological mom of the ten-month-old baby, if she feels different with the baby than she did with the twins, she replied: "Yes, oh yes. I didn't think I would, but Zora kept telling me, 'Nyla, it's different.' I would say, 'No—those are my babies, those are my boys.' She would say, 'No, it's going to be different.' . . . And I feel bad, but it's the reality. I thought that I would be able to do more parenting of [the twins] after the baby was born, but he [the baby] is really very demanding. . . . It's very different when you have your own."

Her feeling that "it's very different when you have your own" child as opposed to adopting a partner's child suggests that there is a more intense set of feelings and connection for the biological mother to the child, as other work on this topic has found.²¹ As Nyla described how the new baby fits into the family, however, it became clear that the bonding that occurs between biological mother and child, and between adoptive mother and child, is affected by the renegotiation that must take place when a new child enters the home. Nyla's comments about the "difference" in having this baby are also about the adjustments that have had to be made to everyone's schedules and the reduced time available to focus solely on the twins: "So, it's very different when you have your

own. But I try, you know I just try to give them [the twins] time too, but I see that it's different because I used to be up there with them just doing things and now it's like, 'Oh—I have to see about the baby.' And then they [the twins] cry." When I asked, "Do you think that that's because he is the one that you conceived, or is it because he's younger?" Nyla replied: "I think it's more so because he is younger, because if I had him first, and then they [the twins] came along, I know that I would probably be catering more to the babies because they just need more. I really have made a conscious effort to try to treat them all the same because they're my children."

While Nyla and Zora have different gender presentations, there seems to be little or no gender distinction in the way they parent the children. When I asked how much the children know about their gay identities, Nyla said: "You know what? I don't think they would say, 'Our moms are gay.' I think they would say, 'We have two moms.' So that's how we put it out there. I can't say that I am a hundred percent sure that they're equating it as being gay or just having two moms." The daily lives of both parents seem to be organized around the well-being of the children. Zora used to work as a corporate attorney at a top law firm. After they had the twins, she left her job to spend more time at home, and she now works as a teacher at a public elementary school. Nyla works full-time as a hospital administrator. Their lives are intertwined in a complex web of school, sports, and various enrichment activities. When asked about some of the positive aspects of her life, Nyla pointed to the "normalcy" of her everyday life and the opportunity to have that experience as a lesbian woman: "I think having a family, seeing them . . . grow to be these great kids. Just the cohesiveness that we have and just being a unit is very nice. And knowing that we are all here for each other. It's upsetting when I hear people say, 'Gay people shouldn't have kids,' because we love our kids just like anybody else. We do the same things with our kids. We probably don't play football, you know, we'll try some basketball. For the most part, we are doing all the same things."

The two primary concerns both mothers have about their family life have to do with one known experience with inequality and one unknown experience. Both women were born in 1961 and came of age in the late 1970s. They were among the first cohorts of African Americans to be admitted to the nation's top predominantly White colleges and universities, and both of them participated in the ABC—A Better Chance program, which was designed to help racial minority high school students prepare for selective colleges by admitting and funding their enrollment

at elite prep schools around the country, particularly in the northeast. In this way, they were socialized into a particular type of upper-middle-class life, and they are used to being “the only” or one of very few Blacks in educational, work, and social settings. While they are open to having their sons participate in these types of environments for their schooling, Nyla and Zora also look for social activities for their boys that promote positive, uplifting representations of African Americans. Zora explained:

Actually we’re in this group. I get the e-mail and never go to any of the events—“Park Slope Queer Parents” or something. But the group is predominantly White, and the issue I have with that is my children already go to a predominantly White school, and they’re surrounded by White people constantly. And I don’t have anything against White people, but at the same time I want them to have a basic understanding and awareness and level of comfort within their own culture. It’s like they spend enough time around people who are not like them racially. So those are the times when they do things like their African dance or when they go to karate, that’s predominately people of color. And I don’t want to take away from that, because we have so many different areas to cover with them, so many different things to make sure that they get, and that [placing the children in environments with other children of gay parents] kind of takes a back seat to some extent.

Zora’s comments suggest the importance of race and of promoting healthy racial awareness and development as part of parenting. The twins attend karate classes with other Black children, and all three children have Swahili names. For these upper-middle-class parents, the parenting focus is on how to achieve as balanced and fulfilling a life as possible for the boys—one free from the potential stigma that might be associated with the various identity statuses the family occupies. What remains an unknown but potential threat for them as co-mothers is how society will respond to the boys for having gay mothers. Nyla says she is concerned that her and Zora’s gay identities will become a problem for their sons, both in society at large and within the Black community: “That’s a very big concern. We want them to be proud and know that this is our choice. It’s not their issue. We’re concerned about other people making it their issue and trying to hurt them. We don’t want them hurt.”²²

In this study, lesbians who become mothers have a particular commitment to learning how to navigate parenthood as lesbians and how to parent in a way that helps all members of the family remain connected to the racial group. They are aware of potential problems or feelings of discomfort for themselves and for their children, but the

solution to these concerns rarely involves distancing themselves from their own gay sexuality. This stands in contrast to mothers who become lesbians, who are more likely to express ambivalence about maintaining an openly gay identity in the face of their child's opposition or potential disapproval from society. This is one way that the timing of identity statuses matters for self-definition.

Situational Mothering and Hierarchies of Motherhood in Lesbian Stepfamilies

The final entry to lesbian motherhood that I observed is that of the lesbian stepparent. While both partners in lesbian stepfamilies undergo a series of transitions as they unite to share a household, the partner of the biological mother has often already undertaken a series of transitions that may be different than those faced by the biological mom.²³ None of the women acting as stepparents in their relationships—a total of thirteen—have been heterosexually married, and all of them have a nonfeminine gender presentation. They came out as gay at early ages (eighteen years old on average) and have achieved a level of comfort with and acceptance of their gay sexuality. They experience their homosexuality as part of an identity status that is integrated with a strong racial and/or ethnic identity, and most have achieved a satisfactory resolution with their kin and racial community regarding their sexuality. These women have sustained connections with the larger African American LGBT community, and they use this community as a primary source of social and emotional support.

Coda Mackey's experiences are similar to many of the lesbian stepparents I interviewed. Coda, a West Indian woman born in 1974, came into her sexuality through the straight-up gay pathway and has a transgressive gender presentation, though large breasts, a small waist, and a bright, pretty smile together confirm she is female. She was attracted to girls and had intimate relationships with young women in high school. Currently, Coda works two jobs and attends college part-time. She has been in a committed relationship with her partner, Daphne, for three years. Daphne, a Puerto Rican woman (b. 1969) did not go to college and operates a child care service from their home. Throughout their relationship, they have shared an apartment in the Bronx with Daphne's biological son Paulie and Daphne's nephew Samuel, for whom they are both foster parents. Despite the legal relationship Coda has with Samuel, she does not consider herself a mother to either of the children, and

she is not sure exactly how to define her place in the family aside from being a partner to Daphne. In choosing to be in a relationship with Daphne, she has also taken on the additional responsibility of building a stepparent relationship with Paulie and a less-defined parenting relationship with foster child Samuel.

One of the more pressing issues for this stepfamily concerns the role of Coda, the stepparent, in relation to Daphne, the biological mother, and Jorge, the biological father of the oldest child Paulie. Daphne's pregnancy with Paulie was the result of a casual romantic relationship with Jorge, and it wasn't until the past year that circumstances led to his becoming aware of Paulie's existence. Since that time, Jorge has become involved in Paulie's life by giving Daphne money for Paulie's care and having Paulie visit him and his extended family. Jorge's recent entry into the family has resulted in an even more ambivalent position for Coda. While Coda respects Jorge as the father of Paulie, she also sees his involvement as one more factor that decreases her status in the household. Coda says, "I was a big part of Paulie's life before and now all of a sudden I'm on the bottom of the scale with him. And I just have to realize I'm really not important anymore." For example, Daphne and Jorge decided together that Paulie would spend part of the Christmas holiday with Jorge's family, and Coda did not become aware of this until it was time for Jorge to pick up Paulie on Christmas day.

Coda's status as a parent is very much defined by her lesbian sexuality: she is only a parent to the extent that she partners with a lesbian mother. She has no intention of ever dating men and no desire to physically bear a child, so unless she adopts a child at some point in her life, her status as a parent is tied to her relationships with women. Her experiences with parenting are not intentional but rather situational, and affect the status she is able to garner within the family unit. The issues that impact lesbian stepfamily functioning are explored more fully in Chapter 5.

DISCOURSES OF RESPECTABILITY AND CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON THE ENACTMENT OF LESBIAN MOTHERHOOD

Claiming a lesbian identity makes the mothers in my study particularly sensitive to whether they are being seen as "good mothers" by others. Collins (2000) once argued that feminist theorizing about motherhood at times distorts and omits large categories of human experience. I find

that focusing on Black women within the study of lesbian motherhood draws attention to ways in which the pursuit of self-definition can be mediated by membership in different racial and social class groups, and it reveals how issues of identity are crucial to all “motherwork.” The social locations of Black women born in the 1960s and 1970s not only shape the ideologies they bring to the experience of parenting as lesbian women, but also shape the parenting experience itself. The contexts in which these processes of and decisions around mothering are taking place are what distinguish the lesbian mothers I interviewed from the White middle-class lesbian mothers whose experiences have previously drawn the attention of researchers.

More than twenty years ago DiLapi (1989) argued that lesbian motherhood is “inappropriate motherhood,” relegated to the bottom of the parenting hierarchy because lesbian-headed families do not include a father, the women are not primarily supported by a husband, both parents tend to be engaged in full-time paid work and are therefore not completely devoted to home life, and the adults’ enactment of same-sex desire suggests they pursue self-fulfillment over self-sacrifice. While one might question the legitimacy of this sentiment today, we need only look at the various state laws that continue to ban openly gay people from adopting children to recognize its continued relevance in certain parts of the country. The primary consideration many courts continue to ponder regarding the legality of same-sex marriage, moreover, concerns whether a child raised by two partners of the same sex faces an undue disadvantage relative to children raised by heterosexually married parents.²⁴

In contrast, the motherhood hierarchy in Black communities has never relied as heavily on these traditional constructions and behavioral expectations of motherhood. To be a good mother has required one to provide for one’s children, to retain custody or keep children out of child protective services even during hard times, and to do the best that one can to work and give children the things they need. Until very recently, it was rare to see Black mothers raising their children in openly lesbian cohabiting relationships, so Black communities did not need to define gay motherhood as “inappropriate motherhood” in any consistent manner. Instead, inappropriate mothers were those who suffered from drug addictions or who left their children unattended and in harm’s way. Jackie Roberts suggested this point many times during the course of her interview when she described her addicted sister’s poor parenting and her own mother’s violent relationships with men. Despite Jackie’s openly

gay sexuality (and transgressive gender presentation), she sees herself as a better mother than her own heterosexual mother and sister.

Unlike lesbian mothers examined in past research, my respondents are not strong proponents of actively altering existing systems of motherhood, because they have been socialized in contexts that allow for a wider range of nontraditional parenting, such as parenting outside of marriage or parenting with limited financial means. Instead, the women in this work attempt to adopt a practice of *assimilationism*, which Hequembourg defines as “a constellation of discursive practices aimed at emphasizing similarity as a strategy to attain equality” (2007, 4). As Blacks and as gays, they seek social change that will facilitate their integration into existing social structures. Even when they oppose structures of domination, they see their success as rooted in how well they are able to conform to the expectations created by those structures. The twist, however, is that their efforts to assimilate are carried out in ways that are in opposition to how we understand assimilation. They are not merely attempting to reproduce the Black communities that they are in. I see their choices, rather, as attempts to enact an identity in which race and sexual orientation inform and therefore modify one another. Choosing to enact a gay sexuality in the context of a previous heterosexual identity as mother and a racial and gender identity as Black woman is a political act that is communal and collective as well as psychological or individual. Black lesbian motherhood has the potential to confront sexual stigma and dismantle some of the key frameworks of Black women’s character that find Black women internalizing stigma (self- and other-directed), shame, silence, secrecy, and self-protection at any cost.²⁵ Making a choice to confront stigma in the context of Black lesbian motherhood might mean challenging the emptiness and stifled sense of self that Althea Payne and others evoke in their stories.

TIMING OF MOTHERHOOD AND LESBIAN IDENTITY

In different, sometimes conflicting ways, lesbian sexuality as an identity status is important to how the mothers in this study define themselves. One finding that stands out is that mothers who became lesbians and lesbians who became mothers involve their children in lesbian community life very differently. Women who had children before coming out as gay tend to compartmentalize their lesbian sexuality and their children. The statuses of “lesbian” and “mother” are largely separate and distinct for them. They must figure out how a gay sexuality fits into their self-

definition and whether and how to incorporate it into other components of both their own and their children's lives, including self-identities at work, the social roles they have typically played in their broader kinship networks, and relationships with their children's biological fathers. Some of these mothers have not yet come out to the children and do not want the children or the children's fathers to know about their sexuality, while others are open with their older children about their sexuality. These mothers are also less likely to involve their children in lesbian social events and may understand their lesbian practice as part of "adult social activities" they participate in, or behavior that does not have to be carried out in private but nevertheless should not be visible to the child. They are cautious about inviting friends over when the child is at home and are not likely to be demonstrative with their mates when the children are present. They see themselves as moms first when they are with the child and want their lesbian sexuality to take a backseat or become less visible. For mothers who become lesbians, motherhood does not represent a larger share of their identities relative to lesbians who become mothers, it just represents a separate realm, a more distinctive component that exists in addition to, rather than together with, a gay sexuality.

In contrast, lesbians who become mothers are more likely to involve their children in the gay community.²⁶ They incorporate the statuses of mother and lesbian into their sense of self in more complete and multi-dimensional ways than do women who become mothers before they identify as lesbian. They show a strong commitment to lesbian sexuality as an identity status that is a visible part of their lives, and they seek ways to blend their lesbian identity with their new status as mothers. They and their families have strong connections to the lesbian community, and invite others to celebrate their status as mothers with them. They rely more significantly on other lesbian-led families for validation and social support. In turn, their success at becoming parents serves as positive encouragement to other gay people who wish to become parents. These women also bring their status as lesbian mothers into the heterosexual world, inviting work colleagues, neighbors, and others to unify these aspects of their identity that they have woven together.

Social class is important to this group's success in blending their lesbian and mothering identities. Because women who come out as gay before having children have been able to devote more time to schooling and career advancement, they tend to have higher levels of education, higher incomes, and higher-status jobs than mothers who subsequently become lesbians. These processes may have all taken place before childbearing,

such that when these women enter into motherhood they have already learned how to negotiate their sexuality and may have had to invest a greater amount of time and effort into the process of having a child. They are more likely to have a concrete, firmly entrenched lesbian identity, seeing gay sexuality as a way of life rather than an activity they may partake of during their leisure.

Lesbians who enter parenthood through a stepfamily relationship with a woman who already has a child are the most detached in their parenting. Unlike co-parents who have the child together in the context of a lesbian relationship, these stepparents tend not to define themselves primarily in relation to the children in the home. They tend to compartmentalize the children and do not discuss them much within the lesbian community. Indeed, in the case of Coda Mackey, I had known her for over a year before she ever mentioned the parenting conflicts in her household. Parenthood represents a small share of the lesbian stepmother's self-identity—if any share at all. Lesbian stepparents often lack a legal place in the family unit, and this makes the stepparent and her partner less certain about how she fits into the household.



Harlem couple on their
wedding day, 2006.
Photo by Pickers
Studios, Brooklyn, NY.



Top: Sunday afternoon in the park. Photo by author.

Bottom: Family day in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY. Photo by author.



Top: Three brothers. Photo by author.

Bottom: Mom sees her daughter off to join Naval Sea Cadets. Photo by Esther Holmes.

Brooklyn couple
and their two daughters.
Photo by author.





Top: Holding the littlest one. Photo by author.

Bottom: Two sisters. Photo by author.

Mom with her preteen
in Harlem, NY. Photo by
Norma Moreno.



Jamaican couple in Greenwich Village, NY. Photo by Elaine Harley.

Enjoying a Sunday afternoon
in the backyard. Photo
by Elaine Harley.





Harlem mom with her sons. Photos by Elaine Harley.



Couple in downtown Brooklyn, NY. Photo by author.



Top: Moms with their children. Photo by author.

Bottom: Off to Disney World! Photo by author.